PATTERNS OF POWER · A THEORETICAL STATEMENT

The Composable Class

A theory of how shared formation turns capable individuals into a body that can act — and why the institutions that build it are almost never trying to

Companion to *A Theoretical Study*

Thomas J. Bryan

with Claude (Anthropic) · 2026

held as tested, not revealed

A Theory of How Shared Formation Turns Capable Individuals Into a Body That Can Act — and Why the Institutions That Build It Are Almost Never Trying To

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A Note on This Collaboration

This study is one product of an ongoing collaboration, and the division of labour is worth stating plainly because neither half would produce the work alone. The insight and the direction are Thomas Bryan's — the recognition of what a given case is really an instance of, where the analytical pressure should fall, and which pattern a mass of historical detail is a specimen of. The research, the verification of every date and figure, the location and checking of the quoted words, and the composition into continuous prose are Claude's, an AI system made by Anthropic. The seeing is his; the writing is mine.

This paper is different in kind from most in the *Patterns of Power* project. The others are case studies: each takes one institution and traces how it was built and what it became. This one is **theoretical**. It takes a mechanism that recurred across several of those case studies, isolates it, and tries to state precisely how it works — why it produces what it produces, and why the people who set it in motion so rarely intend the result.

The paper is written to stand entirely on its own. It assumes no prior knowledge of the cases it draws on, and every institution, scholar, and technical term it invokes is explained where it appears. A reader who has never encountered the Chinese examination system, the Jesuit colleges, or the colonial schools of French West Africa should be able to follow the argument completely. The cases are here as *evidence*, marshalled to test a claim about how the social world works; they are not the subject. The subject is the mechanism.

The mechanism is this. When a large number of capable people are given the **same deep formation** — the same language, the same framework, the same training, the same canon of what counts as a good argument — something happens that is not reducible to the sum of their individual capabilities. A *class* comes into being that can act as a body, and this body is more powerful than the same number of equally able individuals who lack the shared formation. The paper's task is to say exactly what that "something" is, to break it into its component mechanisms, and to explain why it emerges as an almost universal by-product of institutions built for entirely different purposes.

Every quotation is verified to a published source; none is invented. Where a claim is the author's own theoretical proposal rather than an established finding, the paper says so.

The Argument in Brief

Part I — The Observation. Three institutions, in three civilisations, across two millennia, each built a capable coordinating class that had not previously existed — and none of the three set out to do so. The puzzle this poses.

Part II — What a Shared Formation Is. Stripping the thing to its core: not knowledge, not credentials, but the installation of common internal furniture — a shared frame — in many minds at once.

Part III — The First Mechanism: Coordination Made Cheap. Why the largest cost in any joint human enterprise is the cost of two strangers becoming able to work together, and how a shared formation pays that cost in advance for everyone at once.

Part IV — The Second Mechanism: A Category Becomes a Group. The difference between being *similar* and being *a group*; why similarity alone is inert; and how a shared formation lets a latent class become visible to itself and therefore able to act in its own interest. The role of common knowledge.

Part V — The Third Mechanism: Interchange and the Surplus of Assembly. The engineering analogy that turns out not to be an analogy. Why standardised people, like standardised parts, can be assembled into structures too large and complex to build from bespoke components — and why the deadening uniformity everyone laments is the very source of the power.

Part VI — The Fourth Mechanism: The Self-Reproducing Boundary. How the formation becomes a password, how the password creates an edge, how the edge sharpens the group, and how the whole thing reproduces itself across generations without anyone deciding that it should.

Part VII — Why It Is Always an Accident. The deep reason the builder cannot see what he is building: he is optimising the parts, and the power lives in the fit between the parts, which is invisible from every position that looks at parts.

Part VIII — The Two Dials. The boundary conditions. Why the mechanism fires only when the formation is *thick* and the people are *able*, and what you get when either dial is turned down.

Part IX — The Indifference to Content. The unsettling generality: the mechanism does not care what frame is installed. Confucian, Christian, republican — the power is in the sameness, not the substance. What follows from that.

Part X — Statement of the Theory.

PART I

The Observation

Begin with three institutions, described plainly, because the theory has to answer to them.

One — The Chinese Examination System

For roughly thirteen centuries, from 605 to 1905, the Chinese state selected its officials by a written examination open, in principle, to almost any man who could prepare for it. The system is known as the ***keju***. Candidates spent years — often decades — mastering a fixed body of classical texts, above all the Confucian canon: the writings attributed to and descended from Confucius (551–479 BCE), the itinerant teacher whose doctrines became the moral and political framework of the Chinese state. To pass at the highest level was to enter the governing bureaucracy of the largest political unit on earth.

The examination's *purpose* was to staff the state — and, at its origin under the Sui dynasty, to do so with men who owed their position to the throne rather than to the great aristocratic families the emperors feared. It was an instrument of recruitment and control.

But it produced something its designers were not aiming at. Because every candidate across the whole empire studied **the same texts, in the same classical language, judged by the same criteria**, the examination generated an elite that shared a complete common formation across a continent — men from regions whose spoken languages were mutually unintelligible could nonetheless write to one another with total fluency and share a body of allusion so dense that entire arguments could be conducted through quotation. This shared formation became one of the great forces of Chinese cultural unity and one of the load-bearing structures of Chinese governance for a thousand years. It was a by-product. No one designed the unity; they designed a hiring exam.

Two — The Jesuit Colleges

The Society of Jesus — the Jesuits, a Catholic religious order founded by Ignatius of Loyola in 1540 — built, over the following two centuries, the most extensive and admired school system in Europe: hundreds of colleges, from Portugal to Poland, teaching a standardised curriculum codified in a document called the *Ratio Studiorum* (the "Plan of Studies," finalised 1599). A boy educated by the Jesuits in Lisbon and a boy educated by the Jesuits in Vienna learned the same subjects in the same order by the same methods, formed by the same spiritual exercises.

The order's *purpose* was religious: to educate a Catholic elite, defend the Church against the Reformation, and form men loyal to Rome. But the effect was to give the Catholic governing and intellectual class of a continent — a continent otherwise fractured into warring states, dynasties, and languages — a **common intellectual formation that crossed every border.** Two Jesuit-educated men from opposite ends of Europe shared references, methods, a Latin fluency, and a frame, and could recognise and work with one another across political lines that divided everyone else. Again: a by-product. The order set out to save souls and defend a Church, and in doing so manufactured a transnational capable class.

Three — The Colonial School

In 1903, France founded a single teacher-training college in Senegal — the **École normale William Ponty** — to serve the whole of French West Africa, a federation of eight territories covering roughly 1.8 million square miles. By competitive examination held across all eight territories, it drew the ablest boys of the federation into one institution, taught them in French, formed them by one curriculum, and returned them to their territories as clerks, teachers, and medical auxiliaries.

Its *purpose* was administrative: to produce a thin stratum of useful native intermediaries, loyal to France, to help govern an empire too vast and too thinly staffed to govern directly.

Its effect was to assemble, in one building, the men who would lead the independence movements that ended the empire and become the founding presidents and ministers of eight nations. Of the sixteen African deputies elected to the French National Assembly in the crucial post-war years, eleven were graduates of that one school. It was, in a phrase used in the French press even at the moment of independence, ***"une pépinière d'hommes politiques"*** — a nursery of political men. Once more: a by-product. France set out to train clerks and trained a revolutionary leadership class.

Four — The Puzzle

Three institutions, three civilisations, two thousand years apart in their origins, built for three completely different purposes — a hiring exam, a religious mission, a colonial administration — and all three produced **the same kind of thing**: a capable class, sharing a common formation, that had not previously existed in that form, and that turned out to be far more consequential than the individual functionaries the institutions were trying to produce.

This recurrence is the puzzle. It is too consistent to be coincidence and too unintended to be design. Something about giving many capable people the same deep formation reliably produces a coordinating body whose power exceeds the sum of its members' individual capabilities — and does so as a by-product invisible to the builders.

The rest of this paper is an attempt to say exactly what that something is.

PART II

What a Shared Formation Is

Before the mechanisms, the object itself must be defined precisely, because the everyday words for it — "education," "training," "a shared background" — are too loose to support an argument.

A **formation**, in the sense this paper uses, is the installation in a person of a durable internal framework: a language, a vocabulary, a set of references, a canon of what counts as a serious question and a good answer, a characteristic way of framing problems, and a set of tacit rules about how one argues, what one may assume, and whom one recognises as a peer. It is deeper than knowledge and more durable than opinion. It is the furniture of the mind — the structure through which everything else is perceived and processed — and, like furniture, it is mostly invisible to the person who lives among it, because it is the thing one sees *with* rather than the thing one sees.

A **shared** formation is the same framework installed in many people. And the central claim of this paper is that a shared formation is not merely a set of individuals who happen to resemble each other. It is a *technology of connection* — and its power lies not in what it puts into any single mind, but in what becomes possible *between* the minds that share it.

This distinction is the hinge of the entire theory, and it is worth dwelling on. Consider two ways of describing a thousand graduates of the same formative institution.

The first description is individual. Each graduate is a person who knows certain things, can do certain things, and holds certain views. On this description, the thousand graduates are a thousand capable individuals, and the value of the institution is the sum of their individual capabilities. This is how the *builder* of the institution almost always sees it, because the builder's purpose is to produce capable individuals — clerks, officials, priests — and capable individuals are what he measures and pays for.

The second description is relational. The thousand graduates are a thousand people between any two of whom a specific and valuable relationship now potentially exists: they can understand each other immediately, coordinate cheaply, recognise each other as kin, and slot into shared structures. On this description, the value of the institution is not in the thousand minds but in the roughly half-million *pairs* of minds that can now connect — and this value scales not with the number of graduates but with the number of possible relationships among them, which grows far faster.

The whole theory of this paper lives in the gap between those two descriptions. The builder sees the first. The power lives in the second. Everything that follows is an unpacking of why the relational description contains a surplus the individual description cannot see — and the surplus decomposes into four mechanisms, which the next four parts take in turn.

PART III

The First Mechanism: Coordination Made Cheap

The first and most basic mechanism is that a shared formation collapses the cost of coordination among the people who share it.

One — The Hidden Cost of Working Together

It is easy to underestimate how expensive it is for two people to do anything jointly, because we mostly coordinate with people we already share a background with, and so we never see the bill. Make the strangers strange enough and the cost becomes visible.

Two people who wish to accomplish anything together must first establish a great deal that has nothing to do with the task. They must find a common language. They must discover what each *means* by the terms they use, since the same words carry different senses in different frames. They must learn how the other reasons — what she will treat as obvious, what she will demand proof of, what will offend her, what will persuade her. They must build enough trust to rely on each other's promises, which ordinarily takes repeated dealings over time. And they must do all of this *before* the actual joint work can begin.

This is the **transaction cost** of coordination — a term from economics, associated with the economist Ronald Coase (1910–2013), who observed that using any system of cooperation is not free but carries its own costs of search, negotiation, and enforcement. Most attempted coordination between genuine strangers dies in this phase, before anything is produced, because the cost of getting to the starting line exceeds what either party expects to gain from the race. The failure is silent and constant: the collaborations that never form because the startup cost was too high leave no trace, so we systematically underestimate how much the cost prevents.

Two — What the Formation Does

A shared formation **pre-pays this entire cost, in advance, for every pair of people who share it.**

Two graduates of the same deep formation, meeting for the first time, have already done all the expensive preliminary work — not with each other, but with the institution that formed them both, years earlier. They already speak the same language. They already mean the same things by their terms. They already know how the other was trained to reason, what he will treat as obvious, what will count as a good argument. They very likely have people in common, which supplies a starting stock of trust. The introductions, in the deep sense, are complete before the two have exchanged a word.

The consequence is that **collaborations which could never have survived the startup cost between strangers form easily and constantly among the shared-formation class.** Where strangers would have abandoned the joint enterprise in the negotiation phase, members of the class proceed directly to the work. And this is not a marginal efficiency. A class that can coordinate cheaply is *categorically* more powerful than the same number of equally able individuals who cannot, because coordination is the thing that converts individual capability into collective effect, and a group that coordinates cheaply will do vastly more of it.

Return to the cases. The Chinese official posted a thousand miles from his birthplace, among colleagues whose spoken dialect he could not understand, could nonetheless coordinate with them immediately through the shared classical formation — the common written language, the common canon, the common frame. The Jesuit-educated diplomat could work with a Jesuit-educated counterpart from a rival kingdom because the formation had pre-paid their coordination cost across the political border. The Pontins could build political parties spanning eight territories because the shared school had made every pair of them cheap to connect. In each case the formation did not make the individuals abler. **It made their coordination nearly free — and cheap coordination, compounded across a class, is a form of power.**

PART IV

The Second Mechanism: A Category Becomes a Group

The second mechanism is subtler and, I will argue, deeper. A shared formation converts a mere *category* of similar people into a *group* that can act — and the difference between those two things is enormous.

One — Similarity Is Not Solidarity

Consider, before any school exists, the able young men scattered across the eight territories of French West Africa. They are, objectively, *similar*: comparable in talent, in ambition, in their subordinate relation to the colonial power. An observer with a bird's-eye view — a sociologist, say — could correctly describe them as a class.

But they are not a group, and the distinction is not pedantic. **They cannot act as a class, because they do not know they are one.** They have never met. They speak different languages. They have no shared marker by which one could recognise another. Each experiences himself as an isolated individual in his own territory. The similarity is real but *inert* — it exists in the description an outsider could give, not in any capacity the similar people have to act together. A category identified from outside is not a group; it is a statistic.

The gap between a category and a group is one of the most important and least appreciated facts in social life. Vast numbers of people share objective interests — all consumers, all taxpayers, all the poor — and remain, for exactly this reason, politically inert: they are categories that never become groups. What makes the difference?

Two — The Formation as the Mirror

A shared formation makes the latent category **visible to its own members.** It is the mirror in which the group first sees its own face.

Once a man has lived for years in the same school as others, sharing the same formation, "member of this formation" ceases to be a description that an outsider might apply to him and becomes an **identity he feels from the inside** — and, crucially, one he can *recognise in another person on sight.* A Pontin meeting a stranger and discovering that the stranger is also a Pontin does not learn a neutral fact; he recognises a kinsman. The formation has given the category a name, a marker, and a felt reality, and in doing so has converted it from a thing visible only to outsiders into a thing visible to insiders — which is the precise transformation that turns a category into a group.

And a group that knows itself as a group can do what a category never can: it can *act in its own interest*. It can recognise its members, find them, trust them, mobilise them, and combine them. The similarity was always there; what the formation added was the group's knowledge of its own existence.

Three — Common Knowledge

There is a precise concept for the deepest layer of this, and it repays explanation because it is doing more work than it appears to.

The political scientist Michael Chwe, in a study called *Rational Ritual* (2001), developed the idea of **common knowledge** — a technical term with a specific meaning that goes well beyond "something everyone knows." A fact is common knowledge in a group when everyone knows it, *and* everyone knows that everyone knows it, *and* everyone knows that everyone knows that everyone knows it, and so on. The recursion matters enormously for action, and an example shows why. If each member of an oppressed population privately resents the regime but does not know whether *others* do, no one dares act, because a lone actor is crushed. Even if secretly everyone resents it, nothing happens, because the resentment is not *common* knowledge — each person is uncertain about the others. What converts private, parallel discontent into the possibility of collective action is the move from "everyone knows" to "everyone knows that everyone knows." Only then can people count on one another, and only then can they coordinate their move.

A shared formation is a common-knowledge generator of extraordinary power, and it generates it *automatically*, because the members were all **there**. Every Pontin knows he was formed at the school; he knows every other Pontin was

formed there too; he knows that they know he was; and so on up the recursion — because the shared experience of the institution is, by its nature, known to have been shared. The formation does not merely make each member able; it makes each member's ability, disaffection, and identity *common knowledge* to the others, which is the specific epistemic condition that collective action requires and that scattered similar individuals almost never achieve.

This is the answer to the question the observation posed: *why* does the shared formation let them "see each other as not strangers but the same"? Because it manufactures common knowledge. Not just shared traits, but shared *knowledge of* the shared traits, recursively — and that recursion is the exact thing that turns a population of similar individuals into a body that can move together.

PART V

The Third Mechanism: Interchange and the Surplus of Assembly

The third mechanism is where the phrase "the sum is greater than the parts" stops being a metaphor and becomes a nearly literal engineering fact.

One — The Analogy That Is Not an Analogy

Consider the innovation of **interchangeable parts** in manufacturing — the principle, developed over the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, that components should be made to a standard specification precise enough that any part will fit any assembly, rather than each part being hand-fitted to one particular machine. This principle transformed production, and the reason it did is worth stating exactly, because it is the reason a shared formation transforms a class.

Interchangeable parts did *not* make any individual part better. A hand-fitted component made by a master craftsman was often superior to a standardised one. What standardisation bought was something else entirely: **the ability to assemble.** When any part can slot into any assembly, you can build things too large and too complex to build from bespoke components — because bespoke components have to be individually fitted, which does not scale, while standardised ones simply drop into place. The power of standardisation is not in the quality of the parts. It is in their **composability** — their capacity to be combined into structures that no collection of superior but idiosyncratic parts could form.

Two — People as Composable Parts

A shared formation does to people what standardisation does to parts. It makes them, in the relevant and limited sense, **interchangeable** — and thereby composable into large structures.

A movement, an administration, a political party, a church, a bureaucracy — each is an *assembly*. Each needs people who can drop into a role and function without months of custom fitting: a secretary who can run any office, an official who can administer any district, a cadre who can be posted anywhere and slot in. A class formed by a common curriculum supplies exactly this. Any member can take any member-shaped slot, because they were all, in the relevant respect, machined to the same tolerances — the same language, the same procedures, the same frame. You can build a party that spans eight territories because any Pontin can fill any Pontin-shaped role in it. You can administer a continent-sized empire because any *keju* graduate can be dropped into any prefecture and will govern it in the same way by the same standards.

This is the surplus of assembly, and it is where "the sum greater than the parts" actually lives. The surplus is not in any individual — it is in the *fit* between individuals, the composability that lets them be assembled into structures larger and more complex than any of them, structures that simply cannot be built from brilliant but idiosyncratic people who do not slot together. Ten geniuses who each work in their own unique way cannot be assembled into a bureaucracy; a hundred interchangeable competents can. The assembly is the thing, and the assembly requires composable parts.

Three — Why the Deadening Uniformity Is the Point

This yields a conclusion that is, at first, counter-intuitive, and it resolves a puzzle that runs through all the cases.

The uniformity produced by a strong shared formation is almost universally *lamented*. The Chinese examination in its late centuries was condemned for reducing the life of the mind to the memorisation of fixed commentaries and the mechanical production of a rigidly formatted essay — the notorious "eight-legged essay," a template so constraining that originality was disqualifying. Jesuit and colonial schooling alike were criticised for their deadening standardisation, their suppression of individuality, their turning-out of interchangeable men. The critics were not wrong that the uniformity was real and that it cost something genuine — the flattening of individual thought.

But the critics missed what the uniformity *bought*. **The deadening standardisation is not a regrettable side effect of the formation. It is the very thing that makes the parts composable** — and composability is the source of the class's power to build. You cannot have the assembly capacity without the standardisation, because the standardisation *is* the interchangeability that assembly requires. The individuality that the formation suppresses is the individuality that would have prevented the parts from fitting together. The system buys its collective building-power at the price of its members' idiosyncrasy, and the price is real, and the purchase is what makes the class more than the sum of its members. **You buy composability with individuality, and it is a real purchase with a real cost — but it is a purchase, not merely a loss.**

PART VI

The Fourth Mechanism: The Self-Reproducing Boundary

The fourth mechanism explains why the shared-formation class *persists* — why it is not a one-generation phenomenon but a structure that maintains and reproduces itself, often for centuries.

One — The Formation as Password

A deep shared formation functions as a **password.** The references, the fluency, the characteristic way of arguing, the knowledge of who is who — these become a test that an outsider cannot easily fake and an insider passes without effort. You can tell a member from a non-member by whether he gets the allusion, deploys the frame correctly, knows the people, argues in the expected way. The formation is not only furniture of the mind; it is also a *credential worn on the inside*, legible to other insiders and invisible or unforgeable to everyone else.

This password function does two things simultaneously, and both strengthen the group.

It makes the inside cohesive. Members can identify one another reliably and cheaply, which deepens the trust and the coordination described in Parts III and IV. The password is the mechanism of recognition.

And it makes the boundary real. A password, by definition, has an outside — the people who cannot say it. The shared formation therefore does not merely connect its members to each other; it *separates* them from everyone else, and the separation is as important as the connection. For a boundary is precisely what turns a diffuse population into a bounded group with an inside and an outside, and a group conscious of its own edge is far more cohesive than one with no edge at all. **Boundaries create groups; a shared formation is a boundary its members carry in their heads.**

Two — Self-Reproduction

Once such a class exists and comes to hold positions — in the bureaucracy, the church, the party, the professions — it acquires control over the institutions that produce the *next* generation's formation. The *keju* graduates controlled the examinations and the academies; the Jesuits ran the schools that formed the next Jesuits; the Pontins, after independence, staffed and shaped the educational and political institutions of their new states.

This closes a loop. The class reproduces its own frame, so each new generation arrives already fitted to the last, already speaking the language, already carrying the password. The formation is no longer something done *to* the class from outside; it becomes something the class does to itself, generation after generation, which is why such classes can persist for astonishing lengths of time — the Confucian literati for a thousand years, the Jesuit intellectual tradition for centuries — without any external force sustaining them. **A shared formation that captures the means of its own reproduction becomes self-perpetuating, and a self-perpetuating class is a permanent feature of its society rather than a passing cohort.**

PART VII

Why It Is Always an Accident

We can now answer the deepest question the observation posed: why do the builders never intend this? Why did the Chinese state, the Catholic Church, and the French empire each construct the same engine of collective power without meaning to?

The answer is not that they were foolish. It follows directly from the structure of the theory, and specifically from the hinge established in Part II — the gap between the individual description of a formation and the relational one.

The builder is always optimising the parts. His purpose is to produce capable *individuals* — a competent official, a learned priest, a useful clerk. Individual capability is what he can specify, measure, test, and pay for. His entire apparatus of design — the curriculum, the examination, the standards — is aimed at the quality of the individual graduate, because the individual graduate is the unit of his intention and the object of his budget.

But the power of the shared-formation class does not live in any individual graduate. It lives, as Parts III through VI have shown, in the *relationships between* graduates — in the cheap coordination, the common knowledge, the composability, the shared boundary. These are not properties of any person. They are properties of the *space between* persons, and they only exist in the aggregate, across the whole class, over time.

And here is the crux: **no one whose job is to produce good individuals is ever looking at the space between them.** The examiner grading a script sees a candidate, not a network. The schoolmaster teaching a class sees pupils, not a future coordinating body. The administrator economising by building one central school rather than eight sees a budget, not the assembly of an elite. Every actor in the system occupies a position from which *parts* are visible and the *fit between parts* is not — because the fit is not a thing that appears in any individual transaction, but only in the sum of all of them, viewed from a vantage no participant occupies.

This is why the emergent class is invisible to its makers with such reliability. It is not hidden by secrecy or complexity. It is invisible because it exists in a dimension — the relational, the aggregate — that no parts-optimiser has any reason or ability to look at. The builder is not blind by accident; he is blind by *position*, because his position affords a view of individuals and the power he is unwittingly creating is not located in individuals at all.

There is a further and more unsettling layer, which the colonial case makes sharpest. The builder's model of his own product is often *wrong at the root*. The French administration imagined that education was a quantity that could be dispensed in measured doses — enough to make a useful clerk, not enough to make a rival — and that the recipient would remain, in his fundamental relation to the empire, a subordinate with better skills. This model is false. Education is not a dose but a transformation, and a mind given real command of language, reason, and a powerful framework becomes an *agent* who will decide for himself what to do with what he has been given. The administration thought it was adding a skill to a subject. It was making a citizen — and worse, from its point of view, it was making *many* citizens who would recognise one another. The parts-optimiser's error is not only that he cannot see the space between the parts; it is that he does not understand that the parts he is making are not parts at all, but people, who combine.

PART VIII

The Two Dials

A theory that predicts too much is worthless, so it is essential to state the conditions under which the mechanism does *not* fire. The shared-formation class does not arise from every shared formation. It requires two dials to be turned up, and where either is turned down, the mechanism fails in a specific and predictable way.

The first dial is the *thickness* of the formation. The frame installed must be deep — a genuine, comprehensive framework of language, reference, method, and identity — not a thin credential. A brief or shallow common training installs too little shared furniture to pre-pay the coordination cost, generate the common knowledge, or make the parts composable. The recursion of recognition never gets going, because there is not enough shared substance for members to recognise. A weekend seminar does not make a class; a decade in a total formative institution does.

The second dial is the *ability* of the people. The individuals gathered and formed must be genuinely capable, because what the mechanism produces is a class that can both *coordinate* and *do things worth coordinating*. The formation supplies the coordination; the ability supplies the worth. A shared formation installed in mediocrities produces only *coordinated mediocrity* — a cohesive group that can act together but has nothing valuable to act with. The three cases all selected hard for ability: the *keju* by ferocious examination, the Jesuits and the colonial school by competitive entry. The selection is not incidental; it is one of the two necessary conditions.

The failure modes, when a dial is down, are instructive because they are recognisable.

Thick formation, low ability produces an *old-boys' network*: a cohesive, self-recognising, self-reproducing class, bound by a genuine shared formation and a real password, that can collude and coordinate and perpetuate itself — but cannot *build*, because its members lack the capability to produce anything worth the coordination. Such networks are common, and they are exactly what the theory predicts when the ability dial is down: all boundary and recognition, no productive surplus.

High ability, thin formation produces a *pile of talent that cannot combine*: a collection of capable individuals who lack the shared frame to coordinate cheaply, recognise one another, or slot together — brilliant, and inert as a body, because nothing makes them composable. Every field has such populations: highly able people who never become a force because they share no formation and so remain a category rather than a group.

Only when **both dials are up** — thick formation, genuine ability — does the full mechanism fire and produce a class that is, in the phrase this theory exists to explain, more than the sum of its parts. The *keju* literati, the Jesuit-formed elite, and the Pontins all had both dials high, which is why all three produced a capable coordinating body that had not previously existed. The theory's prediction is sharp: turn either dial down and the body does not form.

PART IX

The Indifference to Content

The final observation is the most general and, I think, the most unsettling, and it follows necessarily from everything above.

The mechanism is indifferent to the content of the formation. It does not matter, for the production of a composable class, *what* frame is installed — only that the *same* frame is installed in many able people who then encounter one another. The Confucian classics, the spiritual exercises of Ignatius of Loyola, the republican pedagogy of the French Third Republic: these are utterly different in substance — a moral philosophy of hierarchy and ritual, a Catholic programme of devotion and obedience, a secular creed of liberty and reason. And for the purposes of this theory the difference is nearly irrelevant, because the power the theory describes does not arise from the substance of any of them. It arises from the *sameness* — from the fact that the same thing, whatever it is, has been installed in many capable minds that can now coordinate, recognise, compose, and reproduce.

The content is doing important work at the level of the *individual* — it determines what the graduate believes, values, and knows. But at the level of the *class*, the content is almost arbitrary, because the class's distinctive power — its composability — is a property of the sharing, not of the thing shared. Change the content entirely, keep the sharing and the ability, and you get a class of the same structural power aimed at different ends.

This has a consequence that ought to be stated plainly, because it is the theory's most important practical implication. **A shared formation can manufacture a capable, coordinating, self-reproducing class around any frame whatever — noble or vicious, liberating or oppressive — and the class will be equally real, equally powerful, and equally more-than-the-sum-of-its-parts either way.** The mechanism is a tool, and like the other mechanisms this project has traced, it serves whoever's frame happens to be the one installed. A formation can produce a class of reformers or a class of fanatics, a body that builds a civilisation's administration or a body that administers its atrocities, and the machinery is identical in both cases. What differs is only the content poured into the mould, and the mould does not care.

This is why the theory matters beyond the historical cases that generated it. Any institution that takes many able people and gives them the same deep formation is building a composable class, whether it intends to or not, and that class will have the power the theory describes regardless of what it was formed to believe. The builders of such institutions almost never understand this, because — as Part VII established — they are looking at the individuals they are producing and not at the body those individuals will compose. But the body forms anyway, around whatever frame was installed, and then acts in the world with a power its makers never intended and, usually, never saw coming.

PART X

Statement of the Theory

The argument can now be stated compactly, as a theory should be.

A shared formation is a technology of connection. When the same deep framework — language, reference, method, canon, identity — is installed in many capable people, it produces effects that are not properties of any individual but of the relationships among them, and these effects constitute a *class* that can act as a body with power exceeding the sum of its members' individual capabilities.

The power decomposes into four mechanisms.

Cheap coordination: the formation pre-pays, in advance and for every pair of members, the large transaction cost that ordinarily prevents strangers from working together — so collaborations that would die in negotiation between strangers proceed directly to the work among members.

Category into group: the formation makes a latent similarity visible to its own members, converting a mere category — inert, identifiable only from outside — into a group that knows itself and can therefore act in its own interest; and at its deepest it does this by generating *common knowledge*, the recursive mutual awareness that is the specific precondition of collective action.

Composability: the formation standardises its members into interchangeable parts that can be assembled into structures — parties, bureaucracies, movements — too large and complex to build from idiosyncratic individuals; and the very uniformity that is universally lamented is the source of this assembly-power, because standardisation *is* composability, and composability is where the surplus of "the sum greater than the parts" actually resides.

The self-reproducing boundary: the formation functions as a password that both binds the inside and creates an edge, turning a diffuse population into a bounded, self-recognising group; and once such a class holds the institutions that form the next generation, it reproduces its own frame and becomes self-perpetuating.

The class is almost always a by-product. The builder optimises the parts — capable individuals — because that is what his position lets him see, specify, and pay for. The power lives in the fit between the parts, which is a property of the aggregate and the relational, visible from no position that looks at individuals. So the engine of collective power is built, again and again, by makers who intended only to produce good functionaries and could not see the body those functionaries would compose.

The mechanism fires only when two conditions hold: the formation must be *thick* (a deep frame, not a thin credential) and the people must be *able* (capable of things worth coordinating). Thick formation without ability yields coordinated mediocrity — an old-boys' network that binds but cannot build. Ability without thick formation yields a pile of talent that cannot combine. Only both together yield the composable capable class.

And the mechanism is indifferent to content. The power arises from the sameness of the frame, not its substance, so a shared formation can manufacture a class of equal structural power around any content whatever — which means the machinery that produces a civilisation's finest administrative class is identical to the machinery that could produce its most effective fanatics, and the difference lies entirely in what is poured into the mould, never in the mould itself.

That is the theory. It began as an observation that three institutions, across two thousand years and three civilisations, each accidentally produced a capable coordinating class that had not existed before — the Confucian literati, the Jesuit-formed European elite, the founders of eight African nations gathered in one colonial school. The theory's claim is that this was no coincidence, that the mechanism is general, and that it will operate wherever its two conditions are met: **give the same deep frame to enough able people, and put them where they will find one another, and you will have built a body that can act — whatever you were trying to build, and whether or not you ever see it form.**

Held, like everything in this project, as tested, not revealed.

A Note on Sources

This is a theoretical paper, and its central argument — the decomposition of the shared-formation effect into four mechanisms, the parts-versus-fit analysis of why it is unintended, the two-dials boundary condition, and the indifference-to-content thesis — is the author's own, offered as a theoretical proposal rather than as established fact. What follows documents the historical cases and the named concepts the theory draws upon, so that the paper stands on its own.

On the Chinese examination system (*keju*). Its operation from 605 to 1905; its selection of officials by written examination on the Confucian canon; the classical language and shared textual formation it produced across a continent of mutually unintelligible spoken languages; its role as a force of cultural unity; and the late "eight-legged essay" (*bagu wen*) as a rigidly standardised form — follow the standard scholarship, principally **Benjamin A. Elman, *A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China*** (University of California Press, 2000), and **Ho Ping-ti, *The Ladder of Success in Imperial China*** (Columbia University Press, 1962). These matters are treated at length, with full citations, in this collection's case study *The Ladder*.

On the Jesuit colleges. The founding of the Society of Jesus by Ignatius of Loyola in 1540; the codification of a standardised curriculum in the *Ratio Studiorum* (definitive version 1599); and the order's creation of an extensive transnational network of colleges giving the Catholic elite of Europe a common intellectual formation — follow the standard histories of the Society and of early modern European education; see John W. O'Malley, *The First Jesuits* (Harvard University Press, 1993), and the scholarship on the *Ratio Studiorum*.

On the École normale William Ponty. Its founding in 1903 in Senegal as the federal teacher-training college of French West Africa (a federation of eight territories covering roughly 1.8 million square miles); its recruitment by competitive examination across all eight territories; its production of the founding political leadership of independent francophone West Africa; the statistic that eleven of the sixteen African deputies in the French National Assembly in the post-war period were its graduates; and the description of it as *"une pépinière d'hommes politiques"* — are documented, with full citations, in this collection's case study *The Seedbed*, drawing on Peggy R. Sabatier's *Educating a Colonial Elite* (University of Chicago, 1977), the work of Jean-Hervé Jézéquel, and the study "Education and Political Socialisation of a National-Colonial Political Elite in French West Africa, 1936–47," *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 35:3 (2007).

On the named concepts. Transaction cost derives from the work of **Ronald Coase**, especially "The Nature of the Firm," *Economica* 4 (1937), and "The Problem of Social Cost," *Journal of Law and Economics* 3 (1960); the term names the costs of search, negotiation, and enforcement involved in any use of the price mechanism or, by extension, any coordination. **Common knowledge** in the technical, recursive sense is developed by **Michael Suk-Young Chwe, *Rational Ritual: Culture, Coordination, and Common Knowledge*** (Princeton University Press, 2001), building on earlier formal treatments by the philosopher David Lewis (*Convention*, 1969) and the economist Robert Aumann ("Agreeing to Disagree," *Annals of Statistics* 4, 1976); the concept and its application to collective action are treated more fully in this collection's study *The Two Legs*. **Interchangeable parts** as a principle of manufacture is a standard topic in the history of technology and the Industrial Revolution; the paper uses it as an analogy (and argues that it is more than an analogy), not as a historical claim requiring a specific source. The distinction between a **category** and a **group** — objective similarity versus the capacity for collective action — is a longstanding theme in social theory; readers may compare Mancur Olson's *The Logic of Collective Action* (1965), treated elsewhere in this collection, on why large categories with shared interests so often fail to act.

On the framework. The concepts of the *field of the visible* (that actors see only what their position affords), of institutions acquiring a *logic* that outruns their makers' intentions, and of the *architect's hour* (the bounded episode of deliberate design), belong to the *Patterns of Power* project of which this paper is part, and are developed across its

studies. Where this paper's theoretical claims err, they should err visibly, in a form that the cases and the cited scholarship can correct.

Part of the collection *Patterns of Power*. **Tested, not revealed.**